

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BANGKO 18570 221229Z

ACTION EA-06

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 18570

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SUBJ: RTG INTEREST IN EVENTUAL REPATRIATION OF REFUGEES TO LAOS

REF: BANGKOK 18317

1. IN AUGUST 19 DISCUSSIONS WITH CHARGE, MFA INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR GENERAL PHIRAPHONG KASEMSI AND UNHCR REP BERTA ELABORATED ON RTG AND UNHCR INTENTIONS WITH REGARD TO QUESTION OF VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION TO LAOS.

2. REFERRING TO EARLIER DISCUSSION WITH CHARGE (REFTEL), PHIRAPHONG AGAIN STRESSED IMPORTANCE WHICH RTG PLACES ON NEW AGREEMENT WITH UNHCR. PHIRAPHONG SAID THAT RTG IS HOPEFUL THAT UNHCR SUPPORTED BY OTHER GOVERNMENTS WILL EVENTUALLY BE ABLE TO WORK OUT SOME FORMAL AGREEMENT AND MECHANISM UNDER WHICH LPDR WOULD ASSURE SAFETY OF PERSONS RETURNING TO LAOS, THUS ALLOWING REPATRIATION OF THESE WHO ARE NOT POLITICAL REFUGEES OR WISH TO RETURN VOLUNTARILY. IN THAT CONTEXT, PHIRAPHONG INDICATED THAT MFA HOPES THAT OTHER GOVERNMENTS WOULD LEND THEIR SUPPORT TO SUCH AN EFFORT AND THAT USG WOULD APPROACH LPDR IN VIENTIANE LENDING ITS SUPPORT TO EFFORTS TO WORK OUT SUCH AN AGREEMENT FOR THE EVENTUAL SAFE RETURN OF THOSE REFUGEES WHO WISH TO DO SO.

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PAGE 02 BANGKO 18570 221229Z

3. CHARGE INDICATED THAT REFUGEE MATTERS WERE BEST CONSIDERED IN UNHCR CHANNELS IN DEALING WITH LPDR. IN ANY EVENT USG WOULD HAVE LITTLE INFLUENCE IN VIENTIANE ON ANY SUBJECT. SPEAKING PERSONALLY CHARGE ALSO CAUTIONED OF PITFALLS AND PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH QUESTION OF REPATRIATION. HE INDICATED THAT WE FOR OUR PART WERE STILL STUDYING OUR VIEWS ON LONGER TERM PROBLEM

RELATED TO REFUGEE PRESENCE IN THAILAND INCLUDING RESETTLEMENT AND HOPE TO BE ABLE TO TALK TO RTG ON THE WAYS IN WHICH WE AND OUR UNHCR MIGHT HELP.

4. DR. BERTA CONFIDED TO CHARGE THAT HE HAS BEEN UNDER PRESSURE BY RTG TO DEAL WITH POSSIBILITY OF EVENTUAL REPATRIATION OF REFUGEES WHO WISH TO DO SO OR WHO DID NOT QUALIFY UNDER UNHCR CRITERIA. AT RTG REQUEST BERTA SAID UNHCR REP IN VIENTIANE LAST YEAR DID ATTEMPT TO NEGOTIATE WITH LPDR UNDERSTANDING UNDER WHICH VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION MIGHT BE EFFECTED WITH LPDR GUARANTEE OF SAFETY FOR THOSE INVOLVED. BERTA SAID THIS ATTEMPT GOT NOWHERE AND THERE ARE NOW NO DISCUSSIONS ON THIS SUBJECT GOING ON WITH LPDR.

5. BERTA WAS COMPLETELY REALISTIC AND NEGATIVE ON THE LIKLIHOOD ANY EARLY REPATRIATION OF REFUGEES TO LAOS UNDER CONDITIONS ACCEPTABLE TO EITHER UNHCR OR RTG. HOWEVER, HE SAID, IN ADDITION TO RTG WISHES, WHICH HE CAN NOT IGNORE, UNHCR DOES HAVE TO CONSIDER THIS AT LEAST AS ONE OF THE POSSIBLE EVENTUAL OPTIONS. HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THERE HAS BEEN NO INDICATION THAT LPDR WOULD UNDERTAKE ANY FORMAL OBLIGATIONS TO ASSURE SAFETY OF REFUGEES. FURTHER PRESENT SITUATION IN LAOS IS NOT LIKELY TO ATTRACT BACK ANY REFUGEES. HOWEVER, BERTA SAID THAT PAST EXPERIENCE IN OTHER SITUATIONS HAS LED TO A REVERSE TRICKLE OVER A LONGER PERIOD OF TIME AND THIS POSSIBILITY COULD NOT BE RULED OUT.

6. COMMENT: CHARGE WILL BE CALLING ON PHIRAPHONG LATER THIS WEEK
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PAGE 03 BANGKO 18570 221229Z

TO INTRODUCE BARNES. PHIRAPHONG'S REQUEST FOR OUR ASSISTANCE WITH LPDR WAS OFF-HAND, FOR THE RECORD AND ALMOST FRIVOLOUS. HOWEVER, SUBJECT TO DEPARTMENT'S APPROVAL, WE WOULD LIKE TO CONFIRM THAT WE WOULD NOT TAKE SUBJECT UP IN VIENTIANE AND UNHCR IS PROPER VEHICLE FOR HANDLING ANY DISCUSSION OF REFUGEE QUESTION WITH LPDR. AT SAME TIME WOULD REITERATE THAT WE HAVE RESERVATIONS ABOUT FEASIBILITY OF ANY APPROACH TO REFUGEE PROBLEM PREDICATED ON REPATRIATION OF REFUGEES IN PRESENT SITUATION.

7. DESPITE PHIRAPHONG'S INTEREST IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH LPDR ON REFUGEE RETURN, OUR SOUNDINGS OF OTHER MORE DIRECTLY CONCERNED RTG OFFICIALS INDICATES THAT THERE IS FAIR AMOUNT OF PESSIMISTIC REALISM AMONG THAI LEADERSHIP ABOUT SHORT TERM PROSPECTS FOR INDUCING ANY SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF CURRENT REFUGEES IN COUNTRY TO RETURN TO LAOS. AT SAME TIME, RTG DOES NOT WISH TO FORECLOSE THIS OPTION, IN VIEW OF THE CONTINUING FLOW OF REFUGEES INTO THAILAND. AND, AS PREVIOUSLY REPORTED, RTG IS CONSIDERING REDEFINITION OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFUGEES RELATING TO FUTURE CASES AS PART OF THIS OPTION.
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